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An investigation of the role of instruction in second language production: A case of third person singular -s

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Abstract

In this study researchers sought to find a relationship between second language instruction and learners' productive use of 3rd person singular -s. Researchers collected written data from 151 participants in two phases in three different proficiency groups. Analysis of data showed that elementary learners are less developed in their interlanguage and are in lower levels of development based on Processability theory (1998, 2003). Advanced and intermediate learners are in fact in higher levels of processing capacity and can provide grammatical structures systematically.

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1. Introduction

The goal of SLA research has been to describe and explain different linguistic phenomena. In the case of explanation, the focus is on the question of how learners acquire a language based on the input they receive. And in the case of description, SLA research seeks for different patterns to show regularities and systematicities in the learning and use of L2 (Ellis, 2008). One of the contributions of such researches is improvement of language teaching (Ellis, 1997b). This happens by proposing different models and hypotheses which can describe different acquisition phenomena and based on them teachers can find solutions to learners' problems in language learning. In this regard, researchers have sought to study the impact of teaching on 2nd language acquisition. Such researches investigate different aspects of classroom and instruction. One of the aspects that have received lots of attention is the acquisition of grammatical forms. One of the main questions which were posed by researchers is that "Do learners learn the structures they are taught?"

A series of attempts to answer this question formed cross-sectional and longitudinal morpheme studies of 1970s which were carried out to find out systematicities in acquisition of grammatical morphemes (Ellis, 2008). For example, Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974) in their studies found that some of English morphemes follow a fixed order in acquisition and learners' first language and teaching method have no impact on this order. Similar results were

obtained in a study by Baily, Madden, and Krashen (1974) who conducted their experiment on adult learners. In another study Larsen-Freeman (1976) found that difference in mother tongue will not alter the acquisition order.

One point that should not be neglected is that rank orders proposed by these researchers give us some lists of ranks about some morphemes without considering the differences and distances between them. This will lead to hasty conclusions about their difficulty of being acquired (Ellis, 2008). However, Krashen (1977, cited in Ellis, 2008) has tackled this problem with grouping morphemes together. He has put morphemes that are acquired at one stage in one group.

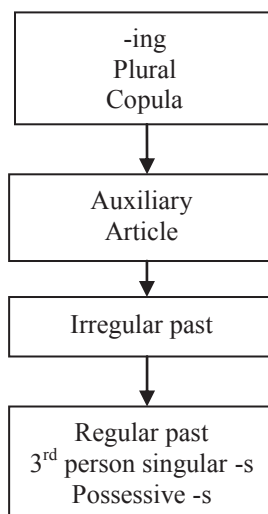


Figure 1. Natural order for L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1977, cited in Ellis, 2008)

In one study on the issue at hand Teresa Pica (1983) studied the accuracy order of morpheme acquisition in three second language learners' group. One group in the study remained untutored and acquired language naturally. The second group received instruction in second language and the third group received both naturalistic treatment and the instruction. Results of the study showed that the accuracy order of some grammatical features is the same irrespective of the group learners were assigned to. According to these results she claimed that if the structure is simple in its form and represents a clear-cut form-function relationship instruction may lead learners to produce those structures with improved accuracy. If the structure's form is simple and salient but it has a somewhat complicated function instruction can be helpful for learners in learning the form but not its function so it will probably lead learners in making a lot of errors. And if a structure's use is very complicated instruction will have no effect and learners will not be able to use that structure.

This study and many others like this one (e.g., Ellis, 1984; Long, 1983) led researchers to believe that there is a more or less fixed order in acquisition of grammatical morphemes and learners' first language, their age, and instruction have no effect on this fixed order. Ellis (1997a) in reviewing the studies done on this issue confirms that learners' performance on "progressive -ing", "auxiliary *be*", and "plural -s" is very accurate. He also mentions that "articles" and "irregular past" are next in this fixed order. Finally the most difficult structures are "regular past" and "third person singular -s".

In another more recent study, Shin and Milroy (1999) who focused on acquisition of ten grammatical morphemes proposed that second language learners' performance on plural-s and third person-s is the least accurate. Also Harley (1993) cited in Williams and Evans (1998) believes that items like third person singular -s are good candidates for form-focused instruction since they are not of high value in communication and thus lack salience.

Most of these studies are considered descriptive since they propose systematicities and regularities. However, they fail to provide answer to why this phenomenon occurs. One of the theories that can try to answer the “why” question in this area is Multidimensional Model (Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann 1981) that led to an even more developed Processability theory by Pienemann (1998). Both of these theories claim that some processing operations can be used to predict the developmental order of second language grammar acquisition irrespective of the language under study. One the empirical supports for this theory is Johnston and Pienemann’s (1986) study of English learners in Australia. Table 1 shows the order of acquisition of forms in English language.

Table 1. The general hierarchy of stages of acquisition (Pienemann, 1998 cited in Ellis, 2008)

stage	L2 process	Morphology/syntax
6	Main and subordinate clause	Embedded questions: ‘I wonder why he sold the car.’
5	Subject-verb agreement involving non-salient morphology	3 rd person-s: ‘this man owns a dog.’
4	inversion	Yes/no inversion: ‘has he seen you?’
3	Noun phrase agreement	Plural: ‘he own many dogs.’ Adverb: ‘he sleep always.’ Do fronting: ‘do he like you?’
2	Plural/ possessive pronoun	Canonical order (subject-verb-object: ‘he buy car.’)
1	Invariant forms	Single constituent (including formulaic chunks: ‘eating; / ‘I don’t know.’)

As it has been observed in some studies reviewed here and the table 1 above, acquisition of third person singular -s is of great difficulty and ironically it has always been presented in very early stages of language learning. Ellis (2005) believes that the presentation of such items is because these items have low cognitive complexity rather than developmental complexity. However, as mentioned earlier, Harley (1993) cited in Williams and Evans (1998) argues that if such items are instructed to learners they may acquire it.

Based on these claims the researchers in present study want to investigate the systematicities and regularities on the use of 3rd person -s by learners in different proficiency levels in order to find experimental support for the claim that if a form is not salient and functionally complex the instruction will have no impact on the emergence of this morpheme.

In order to find the support for this claim, learners from three different proficiency levels were given a writing task and a grammaticality judgment task in order to find the accuracy of their use of this morpheme and their proficiency level.

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, researchers need to collect data from a large number of English language learners. One factor that researchers took into consideration was to choose an appropriate emergence criterion for analysis. For this reason Pallotti’s (2007) emergence criterion was chosen. Based on this criterion, in cross-sectional studies,

systematic and productive presence of a structure is considered as its emergence and four tokens of each type is considered minimal level required for this matter.

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 151 male and female students studying English as a foreign language in three different proficiency levels. Of the overall number of students, 93 of them were female and 58 male. The age of the participants of the study ranged from 17 to 48. For the first phase of this study, 45 intermediate male and female learners of English studying in Urmia were chosen. This phase will be explained in the procedure section of this study.

The remaining 106 students were the main participants of the study, studying English at Marefat and Shokuh Language Institutes in Tehran.

The proficiency level of main participants ranged from elementary to advance (50 female elementary students, 47 male and female intermediate students, and 9 male and female advanced students), and the age range was between 11 and 38. These proficiency levels were determined by the use of institutional placement tests that learners had taken before starting to study in these institutes.

2.2 Instrumentations

At the first stage of the study all participants were asked to complete a free writing task, describing a typical day of one of their family members. The assumption was that the first draft of this task which is demanding in nature can help researchers to achieve the requirement of the emergence criterion (Pallotti, 2007).

A grammaticality judgment task was also designed and used in this study. This test was designed based on the observed errors in learners' writings in the first phase of the study. The reason for using GJT in this study is that its experimental and quantifiable nature could help the researchers to gain more insightful view about the topic (Chaudron, 2003). Moreover, the absolute and concurrent validity of this method of data collection is helpful in interpretation.

2.3 Procedure

In the first phase of the study, learners in Urmia were asked to complete a writing task. They were supposed to write a composition about a typical day of one of their family members. The researchers assumed that they have to use sentences containing third person singular -s to complete this task. The purpose of such writing was to detect the most frequently made mistakes by students. Based on these errors the grammatical judgment task was designed and administered to the main participants.

In the next step, the main participants were also asked to complete the same task whose aim was to identify the productive aspect of their interlanguage. They also completed the grammaticality judgment task which was assumed to be representative of receptive aspect of their interlanguage. The data gathered by these two tasks were analyzed and the results are reported.

3. Results & Discussion

The first phase of data analysis consists of the results of 45 written samples of interlanguage collected from intermediate students. Based on the analysis performed, the 3rd person -s morpheme had emerged in all learners and the minimal level was achieved in all cases. The average accuracy of use was 69 percent showing that in 31 percent of the times learners failed to grammatically provide the morpheme. Subsequent analysis showed that some other errors are noticeable in the data. No relationship was found between the accuracy of 3rd person -s use and the observed errors. But the errors are reported here and also used as a base for constructing GJT items. The errors are as follows:

Agreement of verb and subject

Agreement of a verb after “and” with the subject

Use of 3rd person -s after modals (e.g. *he can has a good car.)

Use of 3rd person -s with modals (e.g. *he cans play.)

Failure to use -ing after prepositions (e.g. *after go to the park, he comes home.)

Using apostrophe with 3rd person –s

On the second phase of the study the same writing task was administered to learners of three different proficiency groups and the GJT was also completed by the participants. And the results are as follows:

Elementary learners showed an average accuracy level of 51% in writing task and 48% in GJT. Intermediate students' average accuracy level was 73% in writing task and it was 78% in GJT. Advanced students showed 96% of average accuracy in writing task and 98% in GJT.

The errors found in the data in the first phase of the study were also evident in the second phase as well. But the average number of instances of errors had a reverse correlation with proficiency levels. The average number of each error in each proficiency group is reported in table 2.

Table 2. Average number of errors made by participants in each proficiency group

Error	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced
Agreement of verb and subject	4.63	3.47	1.09
Agreement of verb after “and” with the subject	6.13	5.07	2.45
Use of 3 rd person -s after modals	6.75	2.01	0.65
Use of 3 rd person -s with modals	5.46	3.56	0.12
Failure to use -ing after prepositions	2.08	3.98	2.46
Using apostrophe with 3 rd person –s	5.43	1.08	0.00

The results from the analysis of the data were compared to the structures the learners were exposed to by learning materials and teachers in the institutes. The reason behind this comparison was to find out whether there are any relationships between the structures taught and learners' performance. But the comparison showed that learners were instructed in all but one of the points in elementary and intermediate levels (Failure to use -ing after prepositions).

The results of this study can be viewed in light of two related theories namingly the Multidimensional model (Meisel, et al., 1981) and Processability theory (Pienemann, 1998, 2003). Based on Multidimensional model of second language acquisition regularities in learner language are a product of cognitive procedures that control linguistic processes a learner is able to handle. So, if a structure or morpheme is difficult to control at a particular

time for a particular learner, that learner fails to use that structure correctly and productively. This claim is clearly evident in this study's results. The results show that although all structures taught in all levels and reviewed in other levels, accuracy of use in higher proficiency levels is higher than low proficiency levels.

The other point about Multidimensional model is that there are two kinds of variation. The first kind is related to the extent to which learners apply a rule in different situations. The second one is about the use of restrictive and elaborative simplifications. In the case of variation of use in different situations the results are not helpful enough since the context of use is so limited and there is just one situation for each learner to use structures. About the latter case, elaborative simplification is observable in intermediate students specifically in not using of -ing after prepositions. About the elementary level learners, restrictive simplification has been observed since they were able to distinguish many items in GJT which they didn't use in their writing. About the advanced-level group the result was not that much decisive.

In the reported results of the study there is a part on the accuracy of different proficiency groups in their performance in both writing task and GJT. As it is reported in Table 2, elementary level learners are less accurate in GJT showing that their interlanguage is not developed to the point that they can use many forms correctly. It may be inferred that the more accurate productive use of some forms can be related to the elaborative simplification which is obviously contradicts researchers' earlier interpretations of the results. However, learners' errors in GJT were in different forms from those they provided in writing task. About the other two proficiency groups, the results show that the accuracy in GJT is higher than the writing task which shows that their interlanguage is more developed and their errors in writing task could be due to the processing time.

With all the considerations the results of this study are not much generalizable due to methodological issues. First of all, the tasks had to be about different situations and topics needing different structures to complete. But our task could only provide few sentences and it is not enough for any generalization. The other point worth mentioning is that oral tasks are not given to students because of lack of facilities and this could make the results less generalizable since many of the constraints in processing reveal themselves in speaking tasks. The number of advanced level participants was also low and the results are not accurate enough. Other researchers can also try to conduct recall interviews in order to gain more insightful views from learners. With all has been said, the results show that Multidimensional model have some value and can be supported by empirical evidence.

4. Conclusion

Researchers in this study tried to find systematicities and regularities in learners' use of their interlanguage in different proficiency levels. This purpose was achieved by asking learners to provide samples of their written interlanguage and by completing a GJT. The results revealed that learners in elementary level are less developed and are in lower levels of interlanguage development and are less accurate in providing and recognizing the right structure and use restrictive simplification in their productive use of interlanguage. Intermediate learners are more developed and use more elaborative simplification.

These findings and interpretations clearly show that instruction does not have a significant impact on the order of acquisition and learners use of their language. And as it is mentioned in Processability theory and Multidimensional model learners are only able to provide the grammatical structures if they are at the right level of interlanguage development (Pienemann, 1998, 2003).

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